

STRUGGLING TO KEEP FAITHFUL: RESPONSE TO GREGORY R. PETERSON AND VÍTOR WESTHELLE

by *Lluís Oviedo*

Abstract. Some comments are offered to my respondents. Concerning Peterson, I suggest a rather distinct description of *humanists* as those who stress a differential character of human beings or some discontinuity with the rest of the reality, in contrast to naturalists; at the same time I try to cope with difficulties derived from theological “weakness” and pluralism. Concerning Westhelle, I recall the need to keep some boundaries and limits, despite all the positive outcomes of hybridity he proposes.

Keywords: boundaries; humanism; hybridity; pluralism; theology.

Gregory Peterson (2006) and Vítor Westhelle (2006) have offered scholarly commentaries on my essay on theological engagement with the present science wars (Oviedo 2006). I am very grateful for their contributions, which add new insights and greatly help to clarify and enlarge the topic.

My intent in the essay was partly to reveal an unsatisfactory situation: that the theology currently engaged in the dialogue with science seems unaware of the problematic character of antihumanistic claims sometimes present in authors active in biology and the cognitive sciences. Another aim was to advocate for a different model of theological engagement with science, one more complex and able to take into account risks and to exercise true criticism. Several interesting observations are made by my respondents in order to pursue a much-needed conversation.

First, I acknowledge that the question of boundaries is more complex than shown in my original description. Part of the problem is definitions. By “humanists” I did not mean those working in the field of humanities as

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opposed to those involved in physical and life sciences. The trouble with describing the semantic container *humanist* is that it easily becomes tautological. Trying a minimal and still quite fuzzy definition, the term *humanist* can be applied to everybody who stresses a distinctive character of human beings—some discontinuity with the rest of reality, especially with the biological realm. In contrast with naturalists, who are convinced that natural science can explain all we need to know about the human person and even solve its practical problems, humanists recall a distinct, *sui generis*, approach.

I admit that such a description is still quite circular and does not help when some theologies are taken into account. We have seen plenty of “naturalist” theologians in the last decades, persons who could easily embrace the other side of the divide, leaving theology without a clear identity in this contest (Don Cupitt, Charley D. Hardwick). Furthermore, moderate theologians such as Nancey Murphy repeatedly subvert the traditional distinction between the physical human being and its supernatural dimension, expressed by the term *soul*. To say the least, it is not very clear in her most recent essays (see Murphy 2005) how far human nature can stand out, from a theological point of view, from the rest of the world, if physicalism (even a “nonreductivist” one) is the only game to play.

The problem becomes intractable when the description of humanism includes a clause that requires in the end one or another form of dualism, an always seemingly bad word, and something to which almost no one will acquiesce today, even in the theological field. If human nature is somehow particular and diverse, and needs a different theory and knowledge—*sui generis*, as some scholars say—in order to offer a moral ground and to cope with some of its challenges, it seems that a subtle form of dualism will be slipped into the new anthropological apologetic, either secular or religious; a double standard of reality must then be accepted. As Peterson knows, something similar happens when consciousness scholars are confronted with the zombie argument and the dilemma it poses. Indeed, in David J. Chalmers’s version of this mental experiment (1996, 94ff.), the logical conceivability of zombies shows that consciousness cannot be reduced to mere functional properties or explained in pure physical or material terms, and, as a result, we should admit that it is somewhat different.

The divide goes then not between Christian theology allied with humanism on one side and reductivist naturalists in the other, because the line crosses inside the theological realm as well, to distinguish between different conceptions and strategies to cope better with the human need of salvation. Moreover, the question of theology entering into alliances should be left pending further inquiry.

The first problem with theology that Peterson raises has to do not with irreducible religious pluralism but with an unmanageable theological pluralism inside the same religious tradition, where both positions seem to be equally legitimate—the humanist and the naturalist. In the end the ques-

tion I have raised touches the core theological problem of the criteria that allow us to discern which position is more fit to deal with biocognitive development. Even if I have advocated for theological complexity and pluralism in the answers, I now stress that the time is ripe to test which theological models are more fit for such a dialogue and deserve preferential treatment. The big question is how to keep a balance between the need to take risks in the dialogue, including an ability to assimilate scientific views, and the need to remain faithful to one's own religious tradition in a way that avoids the dangers of an effective secularization of Christian ideas, which would lead to religious crisis. Only from a pragmatic point of view, after trying different possibilities, that is, *a posteriori*, is it possible to ascertain the fittest models of theological engagement. My fear has been that the dominant culture inside the theology-science field could be missing a point and thereby place in jeopardy theology's involvement for the human cause. In other words, theology could become redundant in such a scenario, when it is unable to express its difference and own contribution. As has happened in the past, theology becomes redundant when it is too closely identified with humanism.

And so I move to the next big questions: whether theology is plausible enough to assume a significant (nonredundant) role in the relationship with science, despite its divisions and the violence intrinsically linked to religion, and what kind of contribution it can deliver.

Let me state the argument from a different point of view. The main problem is that theology is in some way a "weak" discourse, in contrast to the "hard" discourse of science, and so it seems in no way able to compete with science, let alone correct or criticize it. It arrived at this point in a paradoxical way. Theology had been introduced frequently as a "dogmatic" enterprise—a strong kind of discourse, very sure of its own statements, and not prone to acknowledge fallibility or error. Science, at least after Karl Popper, had become a fallible proposal, aware of its limits and the possibility of error in its predictions and developments. Such a weakness becomes in the end its strength, as it promotes correction and progress through trial and error, while theology becomes feeble because of its pretended certainty and lack of self-corrective mechanisms. I am convinced that theology can interact with science so long it assumes a similar "weakness" and ability for self-correction.

For Peterson, troubles for theology are related to an insuperable pluralism of one sort or another and to an inability to become a deterrent to religious violence. I am not eager to embrace the views of postmodern epistemology of science. In any case, pluralism seems to be a predicament of good science as well, at least in the fields I am more concerned with, biology and cognitive science. Pluralism in science is not assessed simply to be work in progress that will lead to definitive and unified theories. Judgments are made as to whether the pluralism is productive. Theology

should learn to manage its levels of pluralism and complexity, perhaps by looking at the intrascientific debates as to when and how far pluralism is fruitful and when it results in negative effects. The point is that theology can grow and overcome some of its shortcomings when it draws closer to science and distances itself from postmodern thought.

Concerning religion as a source of violence, it is impossible to tackle this question adequately in so short a commentary, but it should be remembered that science has also been allied with violence and warfare and that the problems this causes for both religion and science are not enough, from a logical point of view, to deny the worth of good religion or good science.

The more difficult question is what theology can offer in the dialogue. Peterson points to its holistic view, which can integrate the whole picture and restore the unity of human being and the universe, raising some sense of ultimacy. Furthermore, he stresses theology's ability to integrate the descriptive and the normative dimensions. I agree strongly with him when he presents the theological task as showing the limits of partial descriptions of human being, especially when they pretend to be representing the whole. Such reductionism has been habitual in recent years, when geneticists and neurologists thought they were cracking the secrets of human nature even as they ignored its complexity. The case of the biocognitive study of religion deserves particular treatment. However, I do not agree with Peterson's distrust of humanists, whom he identifies with the "postmodern and deconstructionist" party. I am reasonably certain that many of the authors I mentioned in my article as belonging to the humanist side would not be aligned with such a party. Surely, theology represents a third party between scientists and humanists, and, as happens frequently in the political realms, it can play with both parties and make desirable alliances; but the game can turn wrong for theology if the alliances are overemphasized or lead to dangerous associations.

The last statement brings us to Westhelle's commentary, which is placed into quite different intellectual coordinates. Westhelle looks for alliances—or a sort of hybridity—in more slippery territory: the human sciences and cultural studies dominated by the postmodern paradigm. I agree with him when he recalls human depravity as a way to declare a sort of "negative distinctness" in the natural realm, an attempt to deconstruct some humanist ideas leaning to purity and pure origins. From this human status of hybridity, or impurity, as Jean Guittou would have said as well, it is easy to identify the predicament in Christianity, theology, culture, and elsewhere, perhaps even in science. The hybridity program is pursued to show empirical cases of the intermixing of human nature with technical devices (cyborgs) and our resorting to animals for obtaining therapeutic tissues and for experiments needed to strengthen our survival chances. The idea seems to show that human hybridity, not human purity or distinctness, is

the real subject of salvation, which subverts the modern predicament, stemming from Enlightenment philosophy, of asserting human uniqueness and grandeur. This subversive strategy applies to science as well.

This way of thinking more clearly reveals its subversive force when it is identified in the cultural milieu, where different cultures struggle to negotiate their own identity and at the same time strive toward infinite forms of hybridity. If my interpretation is correct, Westhelle seems to conclude that the preferred engagement of theology with the two contending parties is a kind of “incarnated apophaticism,” a nonluminous word, that is unable to reveal, describe, or settle the questions, thereby leaving them open to an uncertain future. This description may seem rather paradoxical, even for theologians, as the apophatic tradition stresses our inability to give a reasonable account of God’s reality, while the incarnation is seemingly understood as an act of revelation in the person of Christ in order to show humans how God behaves. Nevertheless, it is not the first time that incarnation and the entire christological event are read in terms of a negative theology, that is, as a subversion of human rationality—both scientific and humanistic—and as a call to look in a different direction.

The consequence of such a proposal is an invitation to engage in an infinite play of subversion and hybridity in every direction and, in so doing, to transgress boundaries, even those we have traced between scientific naturalism, secular humanism, and theological thought. Theology would find its locus in the constant exercise of hybridity, resorting to more cultures—science would be a sort of culture, too—and transcending limits, which give place to new limits and new hybrids.

Westhelle has a good point. Christianity and all of its theology’s history can be read as a constant exercise of hybridity. Christianity arises as a hybrid phenomenon, as even Joseph Ratzinger recalled when he was a young professor, and more recently as Pope Benedict XVI: between a positive Semitic religion and Greek rationality. All of its evolution can be read in this light as the religion mixed with Romans, Germans, and ever-new populations. Theology has followed the same process, hybridizing first with Platonic and Gnostic thought, then with Aristotelian, and later with transcendental and idealistic modern philosophies. Recent years have known many new theological hybrids: with Marxism, feminism, structuralism, naturalism, postmodern thought, and on and on.

The questions we confront now from a theological point of view are rather similar: first, how much we should engage in subversion and how much in hybridity, because, it seems to me, to practice both is rather a difficult exercise; and, second, in what measure theology should hybridize both with science and with secular humanism. It seems difficult to follow both lines simultaneously. There arises again a question of criteria and of limits. It seems that true hybridity is precisely the subversion of limits and disciplinary boundaries; it goes further than usual in interdisciplinary methods. But, how far can we go?

I am not sure if the scenario I have described can be carried over into empirical territory, where theology struggles between unavoidable hybridity and the need to keep some limits and to offer some minimal certainties. If we should admit some kind of core message of faith, ever struggling to keep its subversive strength in the midst of so many forms of cultural incarnation or engagement, we must conclude that not everything fades into hybrid reality, and not every discourse—scientific or humanistic—can be subverted. My fear is that the very fuzzy situation that hybridity or a continuous exercise of subversion provokes will render unmanageable the Christian identity and, in the end, theological identity as well. The danger in this case is not in becoming redundant, because hybridity generates ever-new forms, but in rendering unidentifiable the Christian message of salvation—or any other religious content. It is a danger we already perceive in some cultural settings, and that does not help to answer the real questions that arise in the struggle with reductionist naturalism. Incarnation is another way to express the idea of hybridity, but we know from long experience that good Christian theology should combine incarnation and redemption, the way of synthesis and of antithesis.

In conclusion, it seems that theology should configure itself as an independent third party in the declared contest between secular humanism and scientific reductionism. Doing so in a conscious way, it should establish its own strategies and alliances with both of the other parties, including criticism and open discussion, not only assimilation. From time to time, theologians should review the field and redesign the web of relationships, according to contextual requirements. Perhaps the terminology of cultural studies, recently advocated by Graham Ward (2005) and others, can help: to establish and claim one's own standpoint, and to negotiate with others in an open cultural space. But scientists will hardly accept their stated theories as mere standpoints competing for acknowledgment, and, by the same token, theology, in order to deal with the described challenges, should envisage itself as more than just another standpoint in a pluralist cultural milieu.

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